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ABSTRACT

This research brief discusses the results of a study concerning the role of community colleges in providing remedial education. The study, conducted by the American Association of Community Colleges, examined institutional policies and practices found in community colleges, covering such issues as assessment of college-preparedness and placement, provision of contracted remedial courses to business and industry, computer use in remedial classes, and salient descriptions of the students and faculty involved in remedial education. An analysis of the responses shows that an average of 36 percent of students new to higher education in fall 1998 were enrolled in at least one remedial course. Results from this study indicate that institutional policies on remediation, for the most part, are mandated at the institutional level. The majority of institutions indicated that policies on mandatory assessment, credit offered for remedial courses, and cutoff scores for placement tests are set by the institutions. The majority of the institutions limited remedial class sizes, used technology in courses, and required mandatory assessment and placement of students in remedial courses--all of which have been identified through research studies as important factors in helping students prepare for college level courses. (JA)

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RESEARCH BRIEF

AACC-RB-00-2

Remedial Education: Practices and Policies in Community Colleges

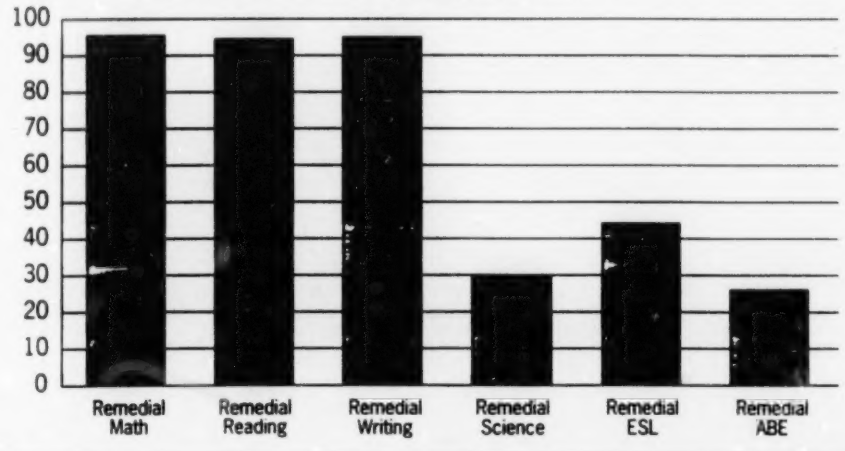
By Christopher Shults

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) conducted a study to expand the knowledge base concerning the role of community colleges in providing remedial education. The study examined institutional policies and practices found in community colleges, covering such issues as assessment of college-preparedness and placement, provision of contracted remedial courses to business and industry, computer use in remedial classes, and salient descriptives of the students and faculty involved in remedial education. An analysis of the responses yielded these findings:

- An average of 36 percent of students new to higher education in fall 1998 were enrolled in at least one remedial course.
- The majority (75 percent) of institutions requiring assessment for all students also require placement into remedial courses.
- Remedial courses are housed by subject area in 61 percent of the institutions.
- Seventy-six percent of the institutions awarded only institutional credit for remedial courses.
- More than 95 percent of responding institutions use computers in at least one remedial subject area.
- Nearly half (45 percent) of institutions provide contracted remedial education courses to business and industry.

FIGURE 1 **Percentage of Institutions Offering Remedial Education by Subject Area**



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Background

Community colleges have long been proponents of open access to higher education regardless of academic preparation. Due to this open-door policy, community colleges have frequently served students deemed insufficiently prepared for college-level courses. However, the policies and practices specific to remedial education, implemented by the colleges to help students reach college-preparedness, vary as much as the missions of community colleges. Some institutions have locally mandated policies specific to remediation, while others have their policies mandated by the state. Since these issues are often dealt with on a state or local level, there is limited information available from a national perspective. In an effort to fill this information gap, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) developed a survey to examine, from an institutional level, the offering of remedial education in community colleges nationwide.

Methodology

Two reports served as important backdrops for the development of the current study. These were the Postsecondary Education Quick Information Survey (PEQIS) Report on Remedial Education by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 1996) and the 1998 Commonwealth of Massachusetts Community College Developmental Education Committee's study on remedial education.

The goal of the AACC study was to provide national data on the policies and practices concerning remedial education in community colleges. A survey was developed specifically for community colleges and was directed at such issues as contracted training, limitations on course taking, and course-specific policies. The survey instrument was mailed to more than 1,100 community colleges; nearly 40 percent returned completed surveys to AACC.

In addition to providing descriptive information, the survey responses were further analyzed by geographic region and by urbanicity. Differences were found in the response rates of institutions represented in the sample and U.S. community colleges by geographic region. Institutions in the Southeast make up approximately 23 percent of community colleges in the United States; however, they represented nearly 30 percent of institutions responding to the survey. Differences also were found in the location of institutions in the sample as compared with the nation's community colleges. Institutions located in either mid-size cities or large towns represented roughly one-third of institutions in the sample (32 percent), but only 28 percent of community colleges nationally are located in mid-size cities or large towns. Because of these differences between the institutions in the sample and U.S. community colleges overall, the respondents to the survey cannot be viewed as a nationally representative sample. Therefore, caution is recommended in using the information from this study for comparative purposes.

Offering of Remedial Education

Every college in the survey offered at least one remedial course. None of the remedial subject areas, however, was offered by all the colleges (Figure 1, page 1). Math, reading, and writing were offered by 94–96 percent of the institutions, while science, English as a second language (ESL), and adult basic education (ABE) were offered by less than half of the institutions.

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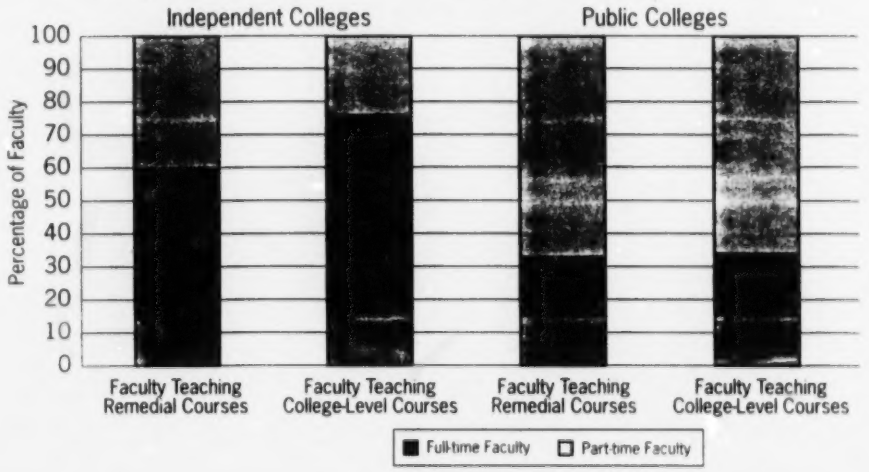
Students

Institutions reported varying percentages of the total student population enrolled in remedial courses. Participation ranged from 1 percent to 80 percent of the institution's total population. The majority of institutions, however, reported that less than 20 percent of their total student population was enrolled in remedial courses. Location of the institutions had an impact on remedial enrollments: half the institutions in large cities had at least 27 percent of their population in remedial education. The percentage of students taking remedial classes was also examined by region. The highest percentage of students enrolled in remedial courses by region was in the Southwest. The majority of these institutions reported that at least 27 percent of their student population was taking at least one remedial course.

The percentage of students new to higher education enrolled in remedial education was even more varied, ranging from 0.5 percent to 95 percent. Half the institutions in this survey reported that more than 36 percent of students new to higher education were enrolled in remedial courses. The region with the highest percentage of students new to higher education in remedial education was the Mid East. Results indicated that half the institutions in the Mid East had more than 46 percent of such students enrolled in remedial courses.

This survey asked institutions to state the average number of credit hours and courses taken in remedial education over a student's academic career. The reported average of credit hours taken in remedial coursework ranged from 2 to 30, with one institution reporting an average of 41. The number of remedial courses taken ranged from 1 to 10 with one institution reporting an average of 20 courses. Half the institutions reported averages of less than 7 credit hours and fewer than 2 courses taken in remedial education. Because institutions were asked to provide averages, it is difficult to interpret how individual students use remedial education. Relying solely on the average credit hours and courses taken in remedial education could be misleading, since the average could include students who need a single course in remedial math to achieve college-preparedness and those who take

FIGURE 2 **Faculty Teaching Remedial and College-Level Courses by Institution Type and Employment Status**



many courses in various levels of remedial math, reading, and writing to achieve college-preparedness. Further, the average credit hours and courses taken in remedial education does not address the amount of remedial coursework *needed*, as a student may not complete all courses required for college-preparedness.

Faculty

In academic year 1996–97 independent two-year colleges had more full-time faculty (76 percent) than part-time faculty, while public community colleges had a majority of part-time faculty (66 percent) (Phillippe and Patton, 2000). For this reason, results concerning faculty are presented here by control of institution. The ratio of full-time to part-time faculty teaching remedial courses among respondent institutions did not deviate greatly from the overall ratio found in community colleges. Independent colleges in this survey reported that 60 percent of faculty teaching remedial education were full-time, and public community colleges reported that only 33 percent of the faculty teaching remedial education were full-time (Figure 2, page 3).

The majority of part-time and full-time instructors who taught remedial courses taught college-level courses concurrently; however, a higher percentage of full-time faculty in independent colleges taught only remedial courses. Twenty percent of institutions required that full-time faculty possess training specific to remediation before teaching remedial courses, and 17 percent had such a requirement for part-time faculty.

Assessment/Placement

Assessment and placement of students into remedial courses is one of the most debated aspects of remedial education. Results from this study indicated that 58 percent of the institutions required assessment for all students. The institutions used a variety of criteria to exempt students from required participation in assessment testing. Among institutions exempting students from remediation, the most frequently reported exemption was college entrance exam scores (76 percent). Other exemptions reported by the institutions

FIGURE 3 **Exemptions from Required Assessment Testing**

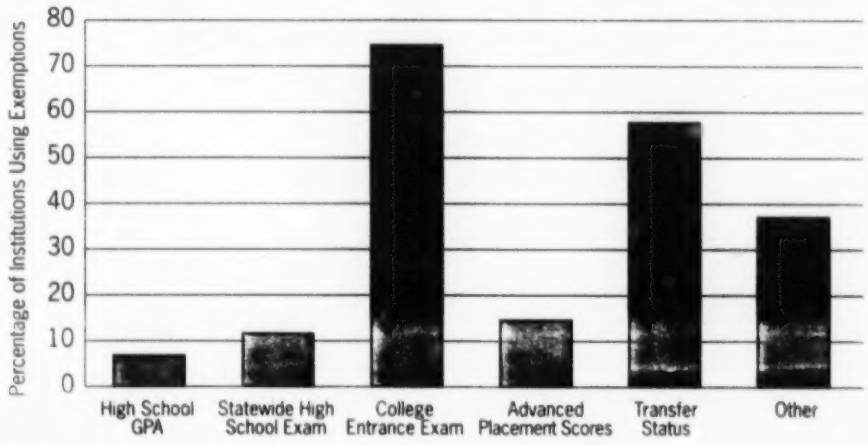
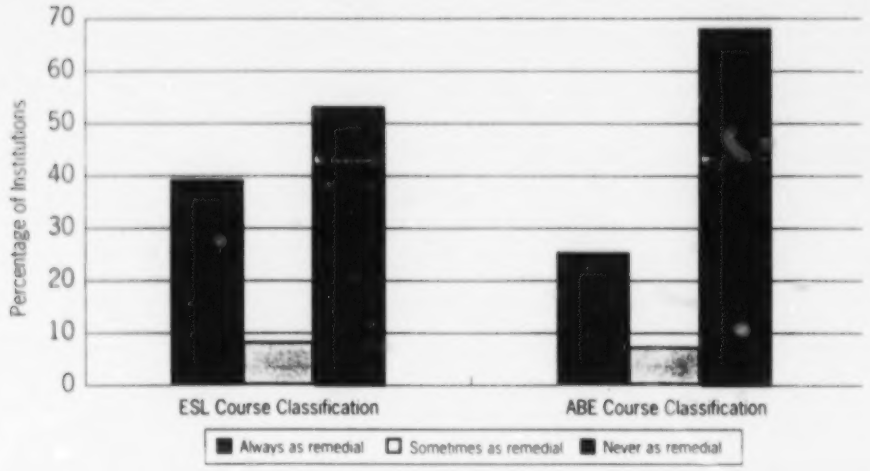


FIGURE 4 **Remedial Classification of ESL and ABE Courses**



included high school grade point average (GPA), statewide high school exam, advanced-placement (AP) scores, and transfer status (whether the student had transferred from another institution) (Figure 3, left).

Institutions responding to this survey used a variety of methods to assess students for placement/advising purposes. The most commonly reported methods were computerized assessment measures (63 percent of institutions) and paper-and-pencil assessment measures (60 percent of institutions). Additional methods reported were college entrance exams (36 percent of institutions), institutionally developed measures (24 percent of institutions), and state-developed measures (16 percent of institutions). Seventy-seven percent of the institutions set the cutoff scores on assessment measures, while the remainder (23 percent) had the cutoff scores set by the state.

As mentioned above, the majority of institutions (58 percent) mandate assessment of all students, and 75 percent of these require placement based on the testing. Of those institutions that require placement, 65 percent indicated that the policy was set locally and 33 percent indicated that the mandate was set by the state.

Location of Remediation

Institutions use a variety of organizational administrative structures to provide remedial education courses. Community colleges offer remedial courses in one of three ways: by subject area, through a separate department, or through one academic department, such as English. Sixty-one percent of institutions reported that remedial courses were offered within their respective subject areas, 25 percent reported offering remedial courses in a separate remedial department, and 13 percent reported that courses were offered through one academic department.

This study also investigated how colleges classify their ESL and ABE courses. The majority of institutions surveyed do not classify ESL or ABE courses as remedial. Fifty-three percent of the institutions indicated that ESL courses were never classified as

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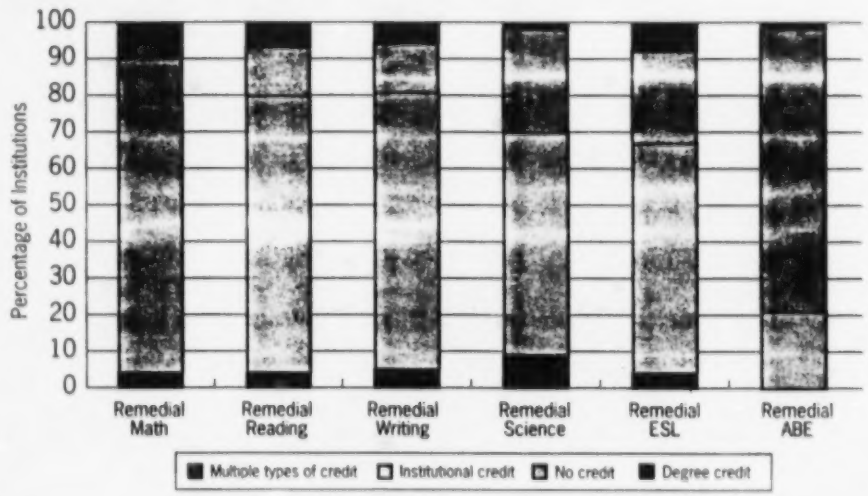
remedial and 67 percent indicated that ABE courses were never classified as remedial (Figure 4, page 5).

The majority of respondent colleges house their ESL and ABE courses in departments separate from their remedial offerings; ABE courses are typically offered through a noncredit department.

Levels

There is a wide variety of needs in remedial education, from students who need a "refresher" course to those who may require multiple courses to achieve college-preparedness. The number of levels offered across the institutions ranged from a low of 1 level in various subjects to 16 levels of math and ESL. Although the median number of levels in math offered by colleges is three, students who have trouble with basic arithmetic would need multiple levels before they would be prepared for college-level math. Similarly, several levels of ESL courses are required. Students taking ESL courses range from those who are underprepared in their own language to those who need minimal coursework to gain command of the English language. Institutions located in large cities tended to have more levels of remediation; however, urban institutions also typically had higher enrollments than colleges located in nonurban areas. Of the institutions offering remedial education, half offered more than three levels of remedial math, two levels of remedial reading, two levels of remedial writing, one level of remedial science, three levels of ESL, and two levels of ABE.

FIGURE 5 **Type of Credit Offered by Subject Area**



Credit Type

Students in remedial courses may receive no credit, institutional credit (credit recognized by the college and counted toward financial aid, but not toward graduation), or credit toward a degree.

Credit policies were examined at an institutional level and by subject area. The majority of institutions (76 percent) offered institutional credit for all courses, 5 percent offered degree credit only, and 5 percent offered no credit (noncredit or continuing education). The remaining institutions (14 percent)

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offered multiple forms of credit, including degree and institutional credit (6 percent) and institutional and no credit (5 percent).

The percentage of institutions offering institutional credit in remedial math, reading, and writing courses was consistent with institutional policies, as 75–77 percent of colleges offered institutional credit across these subject areas. However, an examination of the percentage of institutions offering multiple forms of credit across courses revealed some variation. Fourteen percent of institutions indicated that multiple forms of credit were offered for remedial courses in general, yet only 3–6 percent of colleges offered multiple types of credit within each subject area. For example, a college might offer no credit for ESL courses and offer full credit toward a degree for the remainder of the courses offered as remedial education (Figure 5, left).

Class Size

According to the National Center for Developmental Education (Boylan, Bonham, Jackson & Saxon, 1995), remedial courses tend to have smaller enrollments than college-level courses because of an increased need for individual attention. In this study, remedial math courses had the highest median class size (25) of all subject areas (Figure 6, below).

Nearly two-thirds of the institutions (65 percent) in this study reported having institutional policies that limit class size. Of these, nearly three-quarters (73 percent) reported having a policy specific to remedial courses. The vast majority of institutions with class size limitations (95 percent) reported that the state did not mandate class size policies. Institutions in only one state reported having such mandates.

Institutional Limits

Institutions have received increased pressure in recent years to limit the number of times a student may enroll in remedial courses or the number of times the student may enroll in one course. In addition, there is a limit to the amount of federal

FIGURE 6 **Median Class Size by Subject Area**

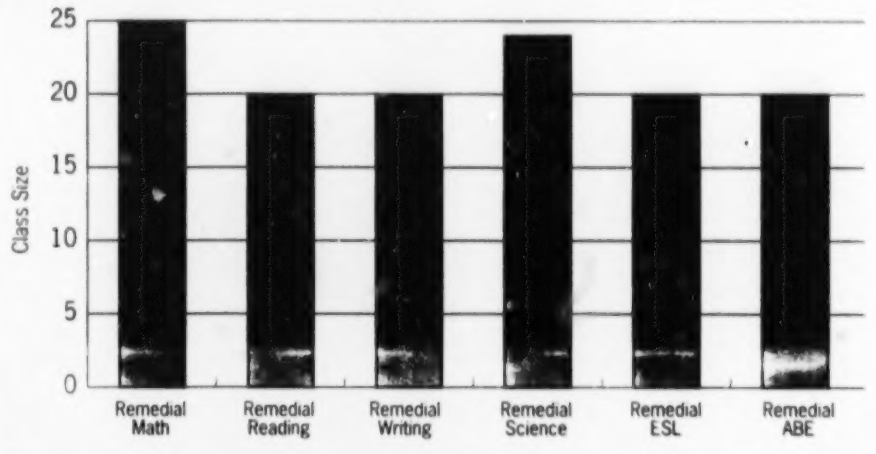
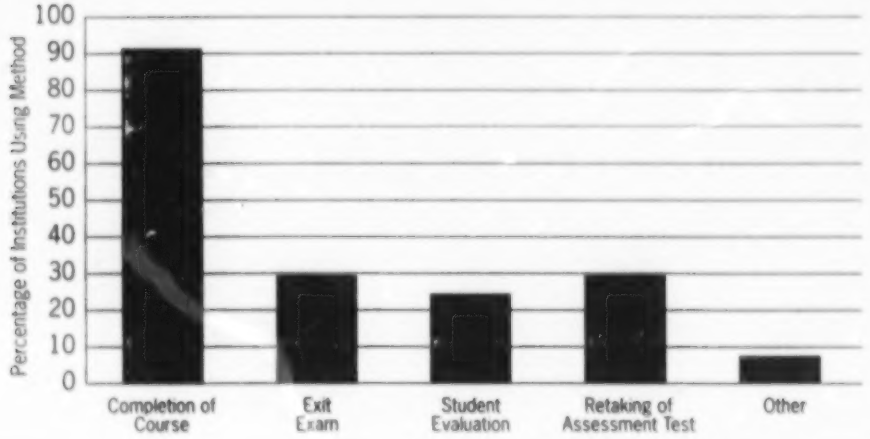


FIGURE 7 **Methods of Exiting Remediation**



aid a student can receive for remedial education. Results from this study found that 23 percent of institutions use various methods to limit students in taking remedial courses. Twenty percent of institutions that limited remediation did so by increasing tuition after multiple attempts, 32 percent by restricting students from taking additional remedial courses, 30 percent by ending nonfederal funding, and 19 percent by other methods (such as limiting attempts or semesters). Of those institutions that did set limitations, 45 percent did so by state mandate and 54 percent by institutional policy.

Another type of limitation employed by institutions is a restriction on the number of times a student can take the institution's remedial assessment test. The majority of institutions (83 percent) allowed students to retake the assessment test, but more than half of those (58 percent) limited the number of retakes to one or two. A substantial number (42 percent) reported other types of limits, such as restricting students to a specified number of retakes per course, semester, or year. Most institutions with a policy (86 percent) indicated that the retake policy was institutionally imposed.

The survey also examined whether students were permitted to take college-level courses while enrolled in remedial courses. Ninety-nine percent of institutions reported that students could take college-level courses not related to a degree/certificate program while in remedial courses. Sixty percent of those indicated that students could take these courses only "under certain circumstances." Ninety-nine percent of institutions also indicated that students could enroll in degree/certificate program courses while taking remedial courses, but 49 percent of institutions allowed concurrent enrollment only "under certain circumstances."

Exiting Remedial Coursework

The majority of institutions (56 percent) used more than one measure to assess whether students were prepared to leave remedial coursework. The method employed by the majority of the institutions (91 percent) to assess whether a student was prepared to leave remedial course work was successful

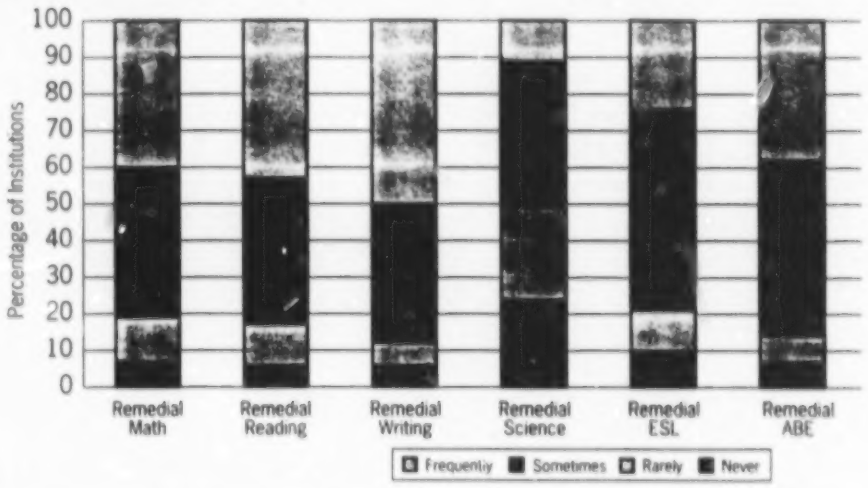
completion of the remedial course. Other methods of assessing readiness to leave were an exit exam, an evaluation, a retaking of the original assessment test, and "other" methods (Figure 7, left).

Course Delivery Methods

Roueche and Roueche (1999) indicated that institutions should be "flexible" with their course offerings to best serve students in remedial education. One method of flexibility used by respondent colleges was the offering of open-entry, open-exit courses. This study examined the number of institutions that used self-paced courses as part of their remedial offerings. Results indicated that nearly half (45 percent) of institutions offered self-paced courses to their students. Another area of interest was remedial education offered through distance education. Approximately one-quarter (26 percent) of the responding institutions offered remedial courses through distance education.

Many community colleges have introduced technology into their curriculum through the use of computers. Respondents were asked to rate computer use as never, rarely, sometimes, or frequently. The majority of institutions (95 percent) used computers in at least one subject area (Figure 8, below).

FIGURE 8 **Frequency of Computer Use by Subject Area**



Contract Training

Contract training is an important function for many community colleges, but how many institutions provide contracted remedial courses to business and industry? Forty-five percent of all institutions in this study reported providing such courses. A further breakdown indicated that 47 percent of public community colleges and 7 percent of the independent colleges provided contracted remedial courses. The majority (65 percent) of institutions contracting remedial education to business and industry indicated that no credit was awarded for those classes.

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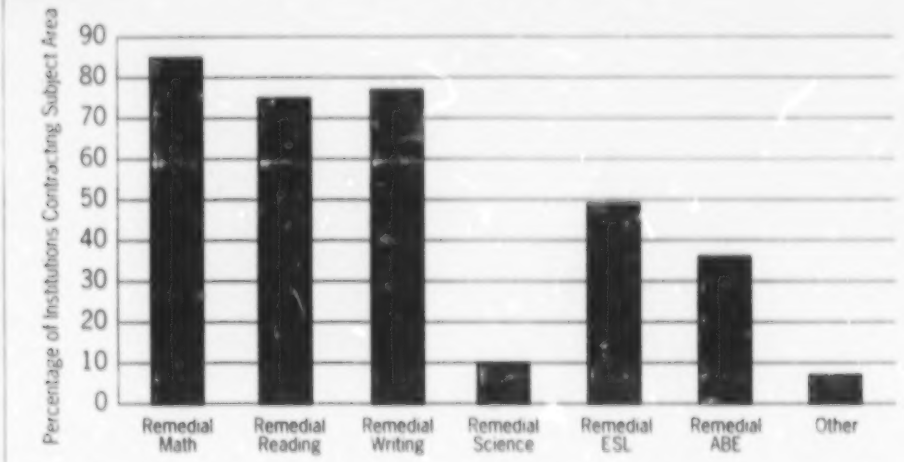
FIGURE 9 **Contracted Remediation by Subject Area**



Responsibility for development of the contracted curricula was another area examined in this study. Respondents were asked whether the college, the employer, or both developed the remedial curriculum. Sixty-one percent indicated that remedial curriculum development was a joint effort between the employer and the college, 35 percent reported that the college was the sole developer of the curriculum, and 4 percent indicated that the employer was the sole developer.

Another area of interest in this study was the type of remedial courses the institution provided to business and industry. The results indicated that remedial math, reading, and writing were offered more frequently than science, ESL, or ABE. A small percentage of the responding colleges also offered courses specified by business or industry (Figure 9, above).

Future Changes

In addition to collecting information on current policies and practices, this study also collected information on projected changes in remedial education. For example, respondents pointed to a need to increase the number of remedial-specific services for students. This would include creating orientation programs, instituting pre-enrollment programs (immersion included), hiring and training more tutors, and establishing remedial-specific advising, tutoring, and mentoring services. Research indicates that the integration of these services with coursework will help students reach college-preparedness, and the introduction of these and other student services would create a holistic approach to *remedial education* identified as *developmental education* (Roueche & Roueche, 1999).

Another projected change concerns the increased use of technology in remedial courses—for example, the use of computerized assessment measures instead of paper-and-pencil measures. Institutions also predicted the offering of online assessment. Responding institutions also indicated that the creation of distance education courses for remediation would be an important trend in the near future.

Many of the projected changes concerned the faculty who teach remedial education courses. Respondents indicated that institutions will be hiring not just more faculty, but more full-time faculty for remedial courses. Further, they predicted that faculty will be required to obtain training specific to remedial education before teaching and will attend professional development opportunities once hired, to help expand their teaching styles and delivery methods. The issues of hiring full-time faculty and professional development are intertwined, as full-time faculty are more integrated into the institutions and have greater access to professional development opportunities (Boylan, Bonham, Jackson & Saxon, 1994).

Conclusion

This study reinforces results found in previous surveys and gives empirical evidence of what policies and practices exist in community colleges. Results from this study indicate that institutional policies on remediation, for the most part, are mandated at the institutional level. The majority of institutions indicated that policies on mandatory assessment, credit offered for remedial courses, and cutoff scores for placement tests are set by the institutions. Results also showed that institutional practices are consistent with suggestions from research studies examining remedial education. The majority of the institutions limited remedial class sizes, used the technology available, and required mandatory assessment and placement of students in remedial courses—all of which have been identified through research studies as important factors in helping students prepare for college-level courses.

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